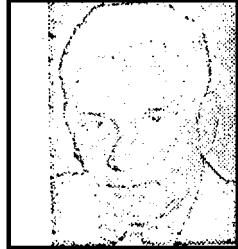


Sanitized - Approved For Release

NEW YORK POST

MAR 2 1961

COPYRIGHT



Worthy's Road

JAMES A. WECHSLER

COPYRIGHT

One of these days the organized societies of American journalists may belatedly recognize our debt to a stoic, tenacious 42-year-old Negro newspaperman named William Worthy.

Through much of the last eight years Worthy has been engaged in a long, often lonely struggle to affirm the right of reporters to travel freely to any corner of any land.

Talking with him the other day, soon after the Fifth U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals had reversed his conviction as a violator of the passport laws, one was reminded how little aid he has received throughout his battle from institutions which pay limitless lip-service to the concept of "The People's Right to Know."

His most continuous backing during his own "Cuban confrontation" has come from a dedicated civil libertarian group called the Workers Defense League and attorney William Kunstler, acting in behalf of the WDL. A few journalistic voices (notably those of Dick Starnes and Russ Wiggins) have been raised in his behalf, but there has been no angry chorus.

Yet, from the time he first dared to visit the Chinese mainland in 1956, representing the Baltimore Afro-American and with additional sponsorship by The New York Post and the Columbia Broadcasting System, to the moment when he was indicted in 1962 for returning from Cuba without a passport (his passport having been revoked because of his China pilgrimage), Worthy has been waging a one-man crusade in which a free press has a large stake.

Now that the legal tide appears to be turning, perhaps there will be some appropriate acknowledgement of his efforts.

* * *

The record of Worthy's rough journey began in the era when John Foster Dulles had decided, for reasons that still elude me, to bar U. S. press coverage of Red China. Worthy—in the best journalistic tradition—volunteered to go it alone. When I spoke to him at the time, he exhibited no symptoms of a martyr-complex; then, as now, he was soft-spoken, earnest, conscious of risk but wholly undemonstrative. Those who had known him long described him as a sophisticated, thoughtful citizen who would write the truth as he saw it and who could swiftly differentiate Communist propaganda from reality.

After his return from Red China, his application for renewal of his passport was denied. It was intimated that the State Dept. might relax its position if he pledged to accept restrictions on future travel; he refused to play such games.

On three occasions in 1960 and again in 1961, Worthy again undertook a forbidden pilgrimage; still lacking a passport, he went to Cuba to write his view of the Castro story. Six months after his final trip, he was indicted under the McCarran Act for "illegal entry" to his own country.

Now that conviction has been overturned on the ground that no citizen can be denied readmission to his native land. But the broader question of a newspaperman's right to travel freely remains unaffirmed. In that sense it might be salutary if the Justice Dept. were to appeal the reversal.

* * *

The issue is not what Worthy wrote, or whether those of us who remained at home agree with his observations. While I fully respect his integrity, I have philosophical quarrels with some of his reports. I think he is, for example, insufficiently troubled by the degree to which Castro's revolution has devoured its own children and driven such dedicated spirits as Manuel Ray into exile.

But on two large issues Worthy can claim a certain vindication. From Red China in 1956 he transmitted the word and the warning that there were no signs of any imminent or even incipient revolt against the Peking regime. He did so in a period when Mr. Dulles was voicing confidence that Mao was a "passing phase" and that, if we continued the pretense that Red China did not exist, it would soon fade away. (Worthy also vividly described the brainwashing of U. S. prisoners.)

Then from Cuba, at a time when wishful thinking about Castro's early demise dominated CIA and other agencies, he wrote—before the Bay of Pigs disaster—that we were deceiving ourselves, and that Castro's grip on his country was strong. If he had been taken seriously, we might have been spared that tragedy.

In his soft voice, Worthy now remarks that "it takes three or four years before reality catches up with the myth."

It is his present judgment that Castro is now authentically eager for "normalization" of relations with the U. S., and is prepared to make major concessions toward that goal. Perhaps his opinion should not be too lightly discounted again.

* * *

But whether history ultimately proves Bill Worthy prescient is far less consequential than the nature of the battle he has waged against an intolerable form of government censorship. To tell reporters where they may go is no less obnoxious than to tell them what they may write. His crusade has so far led him into debt rather than to glory; too often he has had the sense that he was walking in solitude while other men won Pulitzer prizes for diligently executing an assignment on the company's time. There should be some journalistic citation on earth for a man who has too long been on his own, and whose endeavors, if ultimately successful, may win a larger freedom, not only for journalists, but for all who find their travels curbed by our "walls."